

John 16:12-15

(Jesus said) "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

"God beyond Us; God beside Us; God within Us"

There are many issues that divide the Church these days, and I'm not just speaking of the division into so many denominations; I'm speaking about divisions within denominations and divisions within *congregations*. Yet one thing that all Christians have in common is a belief in a TRIUNE God. We may not understand what the Trinity *is*, but all Christian churches affirm the Trinity...which is pretty surprising considering that the words "trinity" or "triune" never appear in the Bible; rather the trinity is *discerned* from the Bible, in passages like the one read this morning. Jesus describes the relationship between himself and the Father and the Holy Spirit in terms that – let's face it – are not exactly clear, and our mathematical minds struggle to comprehend how God is three-in-one. So many analogies have been made – from water to light to an egg to a parfait – and all can be useful or not. This morning I would like to offer an explanation that perhaps will be useful, and one that may reflect your own life experience, the kind of experience that John Wesley had and that he described as common to the Christian. My prayer is that this explanation will not just be educational but also draw you into a closer relationship with God.

And let me start with a word on that topic: our relationship with God. There is nothing more important in our lives than a relationship with God. And I'm not talking about a relationship of convenience here; there are people who relate to God in the same way that they relate to a car; most of time your car is parked somewhere out of sight, and it basically serves as a tool to get you from one place to the next. Sometimes God sits in the driveway for days, weeks, or months before you actually need God for something, so you go to him, start him up, get to where you need to go, park him somewhere, and forget about him until you need him again. The time you spend with God may be nice – he has bucket seats, climate control, good handling, and a great sound system. But ultimately God is just something that you need to get you through your life. But if you consider God to be nothing more than a tool for your own use, you will eventually be disappointed, because God has plans for your life and for this world, and if you insist on God fitting into your plans, you and God will only intersect when your will and God's will coincide. You might have a few fantastic experiences with God, but they will be temporary and, in a way, accidental – you just happen to run into God in those moments when you needed him for something, but the rest of your time was just spent on yourself. You may experience the joy that God gives when you give of yourself to others, and you may try to keep that joyful feeling by giving to those you love – your family and friends, but the limits to your love will end up being the limits to your joy. If you choose to give to those who *you* favor while neglecting those you don't know or don't trust or don't care about, you will never know the joy that God wants you to know. A strong relationship with God spawns a strong relationship with others, and not just those who are close to you; ALL others. Why

did so many people follow Jesus? Because he loved people regardless of their age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, ability level, or anything. Why are prayerful, dedicated Christians the happiest people on the planet? Because their strong love of God is replicated in their strong love for others, all others. And that love of God and others is the result of a committed prayer life, a commitment to a relationship with God. You can hardly have a relationship with another person if you spend only a few hours a week with that person. How can you expect anything different with God?

Unfortunately thinking of God in terms of the Trinity can be a stumbling block to a relationship with God; too much thought about the Trinity may distance us from God. We may start to think of God like something we dissect in a biology class – “Okay, I’ve opened God up, and over here we find the Father, and slightly under the Father and a little to the right we find the Son, and this dove-shaped object over here is Holy Spirit.” We spend too much time trying to understand God and not enough time *relating* with God, and *relating* with God is what we were created to do. So allow me to try to help you in your relating with God by expressing the Trinity in terms of our life experience as God beyond you, God beside you, and God within you.

We are all born with this thing called a brain that strives to understand who we are and why we’re here. We form our first relationships, usually with Mom and Dad, and we may expect Mom and Dad to give us the answers to those questions, but even if Mom and Dad are really smart and really wonderful, and even if they know the answers to those questions, the answers themselves are not going to bring you peace. I actually know the answers to those questions, and I think most of you do as well. Who are you? You are a child of God. Why are you here? To love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. There. Are you satisfied? Probably not *and you won’t be until you fully embrace those two truths.*

And to do that requires a change within us, but I believe that such a change is normal to the Christian, and here’s how it occurs. In our lives we become amazed with something in this world. We may be amazed with our bodies: “Wow! Look how far I can jump.” “Look how fast I can run.” “Watch me kick this ball.” “Look at me dance!” We may be amazed with nature: “Look at those stars; there must be a hundred of them!” “Look at how that spider is weaving a web; how do they do that?” “I didn’t know there were so many varieties of fish, and that ocean is so huge and powerful and magnificent.” We’re amazing, and this world is amazing, and we may be tempted to stop there with our amazement, because we can be amazed enough to make the sky or the ocean or the human body the things we commit our lives to loving, to love biology, to love astronomy, to love sports, or even to love ourselves. But if we still wonder who we are and why we’re here we may believe in something or someone BEYOND us and BEYOND creation – not beyond in the sense of physical location, but beyond in the sense of being GREATER THAN all of this, and it only makes sense that if there is a Creator of all of this, that Creator must be even MORE amazing than all of creation. And maybe the reality that we call the physical world is only a tiny part of the TRUE REALITY that is God, who is the true FATHER of the universe and the human race and all life.

It is such amazement that should prompt us to seek a relationship with that Creator/Father. I think of Native Americans and their love of this earth, and how that love gets expressed toward the

great Father (or Mother) of creation. They understood the spiritual dimension that lay beyond what we can touch and what we can see. And they, like us, understood that something stood between the Creator and his creation, something that separated and frustrated the relationship that we could have, and that something was human sin. We realize that we are not who we ought to be – we are selfish, we are frightened, we are deceitful, and in our sin we despair; try as we do, we keep falling short, caring mostly about ourselves and our kin, and fighting with strangers over what we consider ours, and settling for a life of some creature comfort and safety but feeling out of sync with our Creator. We try to rationalize why I deserve more than someone else, but deep down we know that someone else is just as human as I am, just as precious as I am, and yet I treat myself as greater, even depriving the other person of the means to survive. I am guilty of idolatry in serving myself beyond others and beyond God, and I can't seem to help myself. What do I do?

And fortunately God sees our dilemma and sends his own Son to walk beside us, to show us God's own heart, a heart that loves us despite our sin, a heart that longs to forgive us and to transform us, and make us fully and perfectly human once again, **to give us a new birth!** God sheds his own blood and gives his own life to draw us out of our miserable self-centeredness and into a relationship with him. Halleluia! He dies at the hands of sinful men and rises to show us that sin cannot bind those who live in Christ. He frees us to love, to love him, and to love one another.

But that doesn't mean that we're perfect...yet. Our search for a meaning to life and our own existence lead us to look beyond the natural world to the Father who stands beyond creation, our frustration over our own selfishness that leads to our failure to live in peace and fellowship with our neighbor and with God lead us to the Son who comes to us in our despair and says, "God loves you and cherishes you immensely despite your pride and greed and hatred," and finally our yearning to *be* the people that God so desires us to be, a people who live in perfect harmony with God, with each other, and with all creation lead us to the Holy Spirit, **the God within us** who draws us into fellowship through prayer, who speaks gently and lovingly to us, expressing God's own patience with us and yet prompts us to move beyond our self-absorption and nurtures God's own love within us. That is the Holy Spirit working to make all things new, in particular our hearts. It is a painstakingly slow process in all of us, but a process that can be sped up if we allocate time and energy to that relationship with God that he so desires us to have, if we accept God's invitation and resist the temptation to see him only as a crutch that we reach for only when we're broken beyond our ability to stand. We shouldn't wait until we are joyless to seek out God when we can have abundant joy every day that we live in fellowship *with* God.

To that end, we'll be conducting a worship series here at Bethel throughout July and August, a series called *Dimensions of Prayer* based on a book called *Dimensions of Prayer* that I highly recommend. The series will help you in *how* to pray in order that you would build a relationship with God, with others, and with creation that is pleasing to God...and will certainly be pleasing to you.

So I pray this little exposition on the Trinity, the triune nature of God has instilled in you a desire to take your relationship with God to a deeper level. May you be amazed with God, may you live in

peace with God and one another, and may you be a light to others who so desperately need to meet God who is beyond us, beside us, and within us.